

Fresno County jobless rate dips to lowest point in almost 6 years

By Tim Sheehan

Fresno County's unemployment rate in August fell to its lowest point in almost six years, dropping to 10.1% and continuing a trend of 35 consecutive months of year-over-year improvement.

Figures released Friday by the state Employment Development Department showed that the jobless rate had declined last month from 10.8% in July, and was down from 11.8% in August 2013. It was also the lowest unemployment rate reported for Fresno County since September 2008, when the figure was 9.4%.

Steven Gutierrez, a labor market analyst with the EDD, said that August and September are historically the months reflecting the lowest unemployment each year because of seasonal swings in agricultural employment and school starting for the fall. "If the trend holds, we should see it go down even more for September," he said. "It would be interesting to see if we get down to under 10%; it would be the first time that's happened in quite a while."

Jobless rates also fell between July and August in neighboring central San Joaquin Valley counties, ranging from a low of 9.0% in Madera County to 11.8% in Tulare County. All of the Valley counties had unemployment rates that were lower than they were a year earlier as well.

California's unemployment rate remained unchanged 7.4%, while the nation's jobless rate fell slightly from 6.2% in July to 6.1% in August.

In Fresno County, the largest month-to-month employment gains were reported in private-sector health care and social assistance, a sector that added 700 jobs between July and August. Manufacturing gained about 500 jobs in food manufacturing and processing, while business and professional services (composed of firms that provide services for business clients including administrative, waste disposal, legal, scientific, accounting, engineering and technical work) also added about 500 jobs.

In year-to-year estimates, the construction industry reported 900 more jobs than in August 2013, growing to total employment of about 14,600 workers last month, Gutierrez said.

The retail industry also saw continued year-over-year growth for the 28th consecutive month. But Gutierrez said the 400-job gain since August 2013 was the lowest year-over-year growth so far this year. "It will be kind of interesting to see in retail if the numbers pump up as we get closer to the holidays," he said. "There are national reports that talk about expecting more hiring in 2014 for the holiday season, so we'll see how that translates to our neck of the woods."

Across Fresno County, the EDD estimated that 406,300 people had jobs last month, up 2.3% from the 397,10 workers reported in August 2013. The number of unemployed fell from 52,900 jobless in August 2013 to 45,400 last month. But neither the unemployment rate nor the numbers of jobless include workers who have given up their search for work -- people often described as "discouraged workers" who have dropped out of the official labor force.

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